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'Nadia': Possible Dream

By Alex and er Kafka July 18, 1984

"Nadia," which airs at 8 tonight on Channel 5, is an exhausting film to watch -- and for all the right reasons. The syndicated film is based on the early life of Romanian gymnast Nadia Comaneci, who won three gold medals at the 1976 Montreal Olympics at the age of 14.

It is not just a dreamy tale about a young, talented girl. If it were, it might bring out the "isn't that nice; too bad we live in reality" reflex we all stumbled over coming out of "Chariots of Fire." Nor does it fall in with such a seedy film as the recent "Jesse Owens Story." Nadia is dreamy; when her coach Bela Karolyi (Joe Bennett) asks her if she thinks "it's possible for a little girl to fly," she nods a convincing, wide-eyed yes. And Nadia can be false; when her new choreographer tells her to smile while she performs, she pastes on a Cheshire grin that makes one cringe.

But most of all, the Nadia portrayed in this program, directed by Alan Cook and written by James T. McGinn, is smart.

As a little girl (Leslie Weiner) in the quiet town of Onesti, she is smart enough to be wary of the superagressive, slick phys. ed. teacher, Bela, who peers hungrily at her through the schoolyard fence. As an early teen (Johann Carlo), Nadia is smart enough to know that if she trusts this same, uncompromising man, he will guide her toward something, if not good, at least new. From the sober colors of people's winter coats to the decrepit interior of a provincial gym, Cook succeeds hauntingly in making us feel the claustrophobia that would make anyone want to fly.

There is, however, one overchoreographed sequence in which Nadia and her new friend Teodora Ungureanu (Simone Blue) perform an impromptu interpretative routine. Bela secretly watches and is seduced by Nadia's open and graceful confidence. She in turn is hypnotized by his unending

aspirations for her in the face of a government bureaucracy in which aspirations can be dangerous.

After her Olympic triumph, Nadia and her teammates, due to an argument between Bela and a state superior, are taken from their coach in order to train in Bucharest for the national team. In the big city, Nadia becomes the doll of state banquets. Now, instead of watching her dazzling routines on television, her parents (somewhat overplayed by Jonathan Banks and Carrie Snodgress) see Nadia stuffing her increasingly pasty face with rich desserts as national and world attention becomes too much for her and alienates her from fellow gymnast Ungureanu.

After an almost complete degeneration, Nadia recovers once she is again under Bela's stern supervision and gives a spectacular encore performance at the 1979 world championships in Fort Worth. But the ending is appropriately discomforting as the older team members' performances are overshadowed by their younger companions. As the Ungureanu character says, "Judges resent the fact that little girls grow up." And so do we. Everyone's taken in by a little girl's smile and natural grace. It's more painful to be part of the muddled, adult world in which every scrap of effort is visible.

Unlike the "Jesse Owens Story," in which shots of athletic training were so sparse that it seemed almost coincidental that this bitter old man was also a legendary athlete, "Nadia" is loaded with slow-motion action shots, with the accent not on portent, but on beauty.

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